DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 664 EA 018 172

AUTHOR Knight, James A.
TITLE Developing Public Confidence in Schools.
PUB DATE 17 Oct 85
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 17-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Support; Questionnaires; *School Community Relationship; School Effectiveness; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The characteristics and activities of schools with positive public images were identified in order to guide other schools in their efforts to reestablish effective relations with their communities. Recent polls reflect a serious decline in the public view of education, and the resulting confidence gap has created much difficulty for American public schools. A national commission established by Phi Delta Kappa to study this problem used survey cards and questionnaires to gather data from the identified schools. Preliminary results showed that public confidence at both the building and district levels was largely determined by teacher and administrator attitudes. Other important factors were special programs, building and grounds, and student achievement. These results suggest that schools could improve their public relations by working directly on attitude improvement and by developing programs and efforts based on periodic needs sensing techniques. (GJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED265664

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James Knight

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Developing Public Confidence in Schools

Presented by:

James A. Knight, Associate Professor
Department of Agricultural Education
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

Midwestern Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting
Workshop Session
Chicago, Illinois
17 October 1985

EA 018 172

Developing Public Confidence in Schools

Problem Statement

Until very recently, public support for schools in America had been steadily declining, and the national Congress was on the verge of responding to a presidential proposal to create tax incentives or vouchers or both which threatened to erode both attendance in and public support for, public schools. The historic coalition between labor, middle class, parents, church leadership, liberals and governmental agencies had fallen apart or at least was in such disarray that it no longer awed those who would rather see other, less expensive means for providing custodial care and bare educational essentials for the children of the working and welfare classes. The public schools appeared to be destined to become pauper schools serving only the populations that no one else wanted to serve.

At a conference held at The Ohio State University on May 6-8, 1982, a number of persons voiced the conclusion that public schools indeed were in decline, probably deserved to be, and would be no great loss to society. A board member from a large midwestern city did not want to discuss ways to "save the system," exclaiming, "I don't care if it is all private in two years." Many professors of education do not believe that the system can be improved and prefer to expend their efforts on other questions or on individual gains rather than systemic improvements.

On a smaller scale, local schools in many locales have found it impossible to pass levies or to stem middle-class flight to alternative school systems, either private or suburban. The majority of school administrators in large cities do not have their own children enrolled in the schools they have designed and maintained. Decline and accompanying despair seem to dominate staff and community morale in far too many localities.

The need to reestablish links between school and community is an obvious step toward creating positive public images for public schools and providing for the whole development of American youth. Many schools need help in designing programs and practices that will create lasting relationships. But not all schools are suffering poor public regard. Many schools have earned financial support, praise, loyalty, students, patrons, volunteers and prestige from communities who recognize them as important moral and economic assets. Much is to be learned from such schools which can be helpful to other schools and communities.

The problem addressed in this effort was to identify schools and school districts which have positive public images and to determine what essential characteristics and activities are transferable to other settings.

Objectives

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To identify schools and/or school districts across the United States that have been recognized as having a positive image.

2. To identify specific characteristics and activities of those school settings where such positive images have been developed.

Related Literature/Theoretical Framework

Since 1969, the Phi Delta Kappan has published the annual Gallup poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools. One Gallup education survey question really assesses people's rating or "grading" of schools from A to F. In 1983, 31% of the respondents gave the schools an A or B, but in 1974, 48% did. However, the percent assigning D's and F's increased from 11% in 1974 to 20% in 1983. Viewed another way, good grades exceeded bad grades in 1974 by about 37 points (48 to 11). By 1983, the good exceeded the bad by only 11 points (31 to 20), and there was a 17-point decline in "good" from 48 to 31. These figures portray a serious decline in the public view of education.

Public confidence is the aggregate of individual citizen sentiments about institutions. There are no absolute estimates of confidence to date. The best we have are proxies that allow us to draw inferences in regard to the phenomenon such as the Gallup poll.

It would appear that the whole history and tradition of American schools has worked against cooperation between the school and the community. As Robert B. Everhart (1977) indicated schools were used as a tool to control and rejuvenate the society through promulgating a new breed of professionals who would minister unto the young. This process of developing professionalism has produced some gaps between the school and families and communities. Brofenbrenner (1972) suggests that the process of separation has been accelerated by societal factors. The natural outcome of the process has been exacerbated by organizational tendencies to buffer employees from undesirable outside influences that might reduce their loyalties and interfere with their work (Bobbit, 1968). Robert Merton in his work, Social theory and social structure (1957), notes that a bureaucracy tends to isolate itself from the outside. The result is separation between the school and community and an inability on the part of both to see that cooperation is desirable or possible.

This study was an attempt to identify strategies and activities by schools and school districts that have been successful in dealing with the confidence gap that appears to be creating so much difficulty for the public schools in America.

Public confidence is the aggregate of individual citizen sentiments about institutions. There are no absolute estimates of confidence to date. The best we have are proxies that allow us to draw inferences in regard to the phenomenon such as the Gallup poll.

It would appear that the whole history and tradition of American schools has worked against cooperation between the school and the community. As Robert B. Everhart (1977) indicated, schools were used as a tool to control and rejuvenate the society through promulgating a new breed of professionals who would minister unto the young. This process of developing professionalism has produced some gaps between the school and families and communities. Brofenbrenner (1972) suggests that the process of separation has been accelerated by societal factors. The natural outcome of the process has been exacerbated by organizational tendencies to buffer employees from undesirable outside influences that might reduce their loyalties and interfere with their work (Bobbit, 1968). Robert Merton in his work, Social theory and social structure (1957), notes that a bureaucracy tends to isolate itself from the outside. The result is separation between the school and community and an inability on the part of both to see that cooperation is desirable or possible.

This study was an attempt to identify strategies and activities by schools and school districts that have been successful in dealing with the confidence gap that appears to be creating so much difficulty for the public schools in America.

Methods and/or Techniques

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a National Commission was established by Phi Delta Kappa. The Commission addressed the concept of public confidence from five different perspectives: (a) programmatic, creating sound and effective educational programs as a way to cement school/community relationships; (b) political, building a broad-based constituency through use of various political strategies; (c) social work, approaching the problem at grass roots levels, using techniques for community development and targeted issue-resolution; (d) public relations and community theory, striving to present a good image and to communicate it in forms most attractive to the community and most supportive of the school's image; and (e) agricultural approaches, duplicating community linking systems utilized most effectively by agricultural education and its counterparts.

Using those models as a framework, the Commission constructed instruments for gathering data from a number of schools--elementary, junior high and high schools in urban, suburban, outer city and inner-city locales in the United States and Canada--with positive images and strong community linkages. To find the sample, Commission members relied on former studies of the Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Discipline, literature on effective schools and nominations solicited through Phi Delta Kappa and other organizations. Information was gathered from

schools and school districts in the sample as well as from selected citizens in communities outside each school. Data were analyzed to determine common and essential themes related to establishing and maintaining public confidence in a school or school district.

Results and Conclusions

The Commission has not completed the analysis of the data that have been gathered. Therefore, preliminary results will serve as the basis of the findings that will be reported. However, the chairperson of the commission recently indicated that it appears that the preliminary findings will generally hold. Two sources of data will be reviewed which relate to the objectives of this report.

Survey Cards

Each commission member was given 10 to 15 open-ended survey cards to obtain responses from various sources (graduate classes, parents, school personnel, etc.). Responses were classified into 22 categories for each of the two conditions: (a) things that cause people to gain confidence; and (b) things that cause people to lose confidence in the schools. Responses were from areas where commission personnel resided (Ohio, New Jersey, Tennessee, Indiana), and they were not random. However, the 148 respondents provided a rich cross section of people and some helpful information to guide the development of more detailed data-gathering instruments.

Approximately 48% of the respondents were parents, about 55% were female, about 13% were minority, about 36% were from large cities, and about 72% claimed to know the school or district well (a better-informed group than average). About 56% of the respondents (n=81) had some connection to education. Respondents to the preliminary survey completed the following open-ended statements:

1. I GAIN confidence in my school or school district when:_____.

2. I LOSE confidence in my school or school district when:_____.

Similar responses were grouped and categories assigned to provide initial direction for commission inquiries. Category definitions were generated after reviewing the data.

Table 1 lists the number of times each of 22 categories was chosen on both the gain and loss lists. Ranks were assigned accordingly. The teacher attitude category, chosen 109 times, ranked first on the gain list; it also ranked first on the loss list with 108 choices. The communication category received the second highest ranking on the gain list with 89 choices followed by administrator attitudes with 84 choices. Administrator attitudes ranked second on loss with 76 choices. The

decision-making process category ranked third on the loss list with 62 choices. Community attitudes was fourth on the loss list with 48 choices, and communication was fifth with 45 choices.

Table 1

Preliminary Confidence Survey Categories Ranked According to Gain/Loss by Number of Times Chose by 148 Respondents

Gain			Loss	
Rank	Times Chosen	Item	Rank	Times Chosen
1	109	Teacher Attitudes	1	108
2	89	Communication	5	45
3	84	Administrator Attitudes	2	76
4	75	Academic Performance	7	40
5	66	Student Attitudes	8	39
6	45	Community Involvement	15	13
7	44	Academic Programs	12	17
8	43	Community Attitudes	4	48
9	40	Staff Quality	6	43
10	39	Instructional Quality	10	29
11	28	Decision-Making Process	3	62
12	15	Buildings/Facilities	11	21
13	14	Discipline	8	39
14	13	Career/Higher Ed. Readiness	19	7
15	9	Non-Academic Programs	18	8
16	8	Funding	13	16
16	8	Materials/Equipment	14	14
18	6	Equal Opportunities	18	8
19	5	Politics	16	21
20	2	Salaries	21	2
21	1	Student/Teacher Ratio	20	5
22	14	Miscellaneous (All Others)	22	14

This preliminary listing provided some surprises. Attitudes are important, and especially teacher and administrator attitudes. Apparently people gain or lose confidence largely on the basis of the perceived attitudes of those who are responsible for operating the organization.

Discipline, first as a problem in Gallup, was 13th on the gain list and 8th on the loss list. It seems that bad discipline works against confidence in a school quite a bit more than good discipline works for increased confidence.

Both good academic performance (4th on gain; 7th on loss) and good academic programs (7th on gain; 12th on loss) are more effective in gaining confidence than are poor academic performance and poor academic programs in destroying confidence in a school. Likewise, community involvement (6th on gain; 15th on loss) is an activity that is important in generating a gain in confidence, but its lack does not generate a loss in confidence to the same degree.

The communications category--any reference to giving or receiving information about the schools--is 2nd on gain and 5th on loss. Those persons in schools who are responsible for information flow should be aware that honest, good communications improve confidence while "poor press" is instrumental in loss of confidence.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were sent to persons in local communities who were familiar to some degree with either an individual school or the school district that had been nominated. Persons were nominated by a school person (usually the principal or the superintendent) as a representative of one of the eight value/institution sectors of the community (note Table 2).

Responses about confidence in a specific school were received from 153 persons. Another 54 replies were received from those who had been queried about their school district as a whole. All questions elicited open-ended responses. While these findings are preliminary, it should be noted that they appear to be consistent with other survey data on citizen opinions of schools and schooling.

Many of the respondents appear to also be the parents of children now attending or who previously attended the school or school district surveyed. Those who were parents tended to rate their schools consistently higher than nonparents. It would appear in a broad sense that the concept of "proximity" (emotional and physical) may influence the level of confidence.

Table 3 depicts the responses related to confidence at a school building level. Note that half of the respondents replied that their confidence was based upon "competent and dedicated teachers on the staff." "Special programs" were also cited as significant contributors to their confidence in the school. Strong feelings were expressed in support of options, over and above standard curriculum offerings, either because they were just desirable or because the programs were needed by students.

Table 2

Value Institution Categories Used for Data Collection

Value/Institution Categories	Descriptors
Power	Mayors, Governors, Legislators, City Council Members, Senators, Congressmen, Union Leaders (and their institutions, organizations and associations)
Enlightenment	University-based Scientists, Professors, Media Owners, Managers, Reporters, Private Research-based Scientists (and their institutions, organizations and associations)
Wealth	Bankers, Business and Industry Leaders, Landowners, Foundation Executives, Poor People (and their institutions, organizations and associations)
Well-Being	Physical and Mental Health Professionals, Other Human Services Leaders, Public Housing Officials, Police and Fire Chiefs, Recreation Administrators (and their institutions, orgfanizations and associations)
Skill	Manpower Training Administrators, Preschool and Day Care Providers, Proprietary School Owners and Leaders, Nonpublic School Professionals (and their institutions, organizations and associations)
Affection	Parents and Relatives of School-age Children, Neighborhood Association Leaders (and their institutions, organizations and associations)
Respect	Civil Rights Leaders, Civic Leaders, Leaders of Fraternities and Sororities (and their institutions, organizations and associations)

(table continues)

Value/Institution Categories	Descriptors
Rectitude	Members of Religious and Legal Professions, Church and Synagogue Lay Leaders, Judges, Court Clerks (and their institutions, organizations and associations)

Note. (Lasswell, 1971).

Table 3

Ranking of Responses Leading to Confidence at a School Building Level

Rank	Reasons	No. of Responses
1	Dedicated, committed teachers	75
1	Special instructional & extracurricular pro75	
3	Effective Administrator(s)	61
3	Buildings and Ground	61
5	Student centered "caring" atmosphere	51
6	Positive attitudes of students/staff	40
7	Student discipline	38
8	Good curriculum	36
9	Student achievement	30
10	Parent participation	28
11	Communication with parents	22
11	Public image	22
13	High standards, goals, expectations	15
13	Board/superintendent relations, policies, decisions	15
15	Administrator/staff community service	13
16	Courteous office staff	12
17	Linkages with other institutions, sectors	11
18	Successful graduates	10
19	Student awards, honors	9
19	Testing, guidance & counseling programs	9
19	Community involvement with school	9
22	Adequate funding	5
23	Students' dress	4
24	Equity	3
24	Community education	3

The next highest ranking was assigned to the "effective administrator" and "adequacy and good maintenance of facilities." Many commented about the importance of leadership, problem solving, trust, respect and a student-centered environment in relation to the administrator. In addition, people expressed satisfaction with the "cleanliness and cheerfulness" of the facilities.

"Caring" was an adjective used frequently to describe the human environment in many of the schools. The "caring" teacher and administrator whose relationships with students encourage student achievement were singled out by about one third of the respondents.

"Positive attitudes of students/staff" ranked fifth. Phrases such as "happy students," "positive attitudes," " proud of their school," were sprinkled throughout the responses. Trust and respect were noted as present in schools which enjoy high confidence in the community.

People in this sample were pleased with the schools, and they alluded to well behaved, courteous students. Some approached the topic of discipline by highlighting staff efforts to set standards of conduct and behavior as well as staff insistence on the standards being carried out. Student committees to develop codes of behavior were mentioned too.

Table 4 depicts the responses related to confidence at a school district level. Note that the top four most frequently mentioned responses duplicate the choices of the school building respondent group. With equal enthusiasm, respondents chose "teacher competence and dedication" and "special instructional and extracurricular programs" as the most frequently mentioned reasons for their confidence in the school district. Table 5 displays the comparison of the responses to confidence in schools and school districts.

Respondents were also asked to circle a number on a scale of 1 to 10 to indicate how much confidence they had in the school or the district. In the enlightenment sector, 73% of the educators ranked their confidence at the 9 and 10 levels. Seventy-two percent in the wealth sector--bankers and business people--responded at 9 and 10. The remaining sector representatives ranged from a low of 42.8% from civil rights persons (respect sector) through the mid-sixties for the remaining sectors.

A second question was posed with the intention of probing more deeply into community perceptions about confidence. This question was couched in negative terms: "Is there anything which <u>reduces</u> your confidence in this school? (or school district?)"

"Dedicated and competent teachers" was at the top of the list of confidence producing attributes. However, a substantial number of persons described the opposite side of the coin in response to the question

Table 4

Ranking of Responses Leading to Confidence at a School District Level

Rank	Reasons	No. of Responses
1	Dedicated, competent teachers	22
1	Special instructional and extracurricular programs	22
3	Building & grounds, adequate, clean, maintained, cheerful	20
4	Board/superintendent	19
5	Administration effectiveness	17
6	Public image	14
7	Good curriculum	12
8	High standards	6
8	Student achievement	6
8	Success of graduates	6
11	Parent participation	4
11	Community education	4
11	Linkages with other institutions	4
14	Communication with parents	3
15	Equity	2
15	Testing, guidance, counseling programs	2
15	Administrator/staff community service	2
18	Student honors, awards	1

about those factors that reduce confidence. Respondents expressed concern about the inability or unwillingness of school officials to eliminate poor teachers.

In summary, these respondents have confidence in schools and school districts when buildings are well maintained with bright, clean interiors, when there are committed, competent and caring educators, when high quality education is offered, when there is good discipline in a safe environment, when schools contain achievement oriented students, have involved parents and offer a selection of optional programs and activities to meet special needs and enhance the growth of all students.

Implications

While these two sources of data do not present an absolutely consistent picture, there appears to be a very common thread that runs through the data. It is in response to that thread that the commission will offer its most comprehensive suggestions.

Table 5

Preliminary Comparative Rankings of Responses Leading to Confidence in Schools and School Districts

Rank	District Reasons	Rank	School Reasons
1	Teacher dedication & competence	1	Teacher decication and competence
1	Special instructional & extracurricular programs	1	Special instructional & extracurricular programs
3	Buildings and grounds	3	Buildings and grounds
3	Administrator effectiveness	4	Board/Superintendent
5	Student-centered "caring"	5	Effective administrator
6	Curriculum	6	Public image
7	Positive attitude	7	Curriculum
8	Student achievement	8	Community development

The preliminary results suggest that attitudes are major factors in influencing the gain or loss in confidence in public schools. This finding suggests that if a school wishes to improve confidence, it should stress positive attitudes as its first order of business. Apparently attitudes, as perceived by the public, are real, and the public acts upon these perceptions. Improvement of attitudes seems to fall into the realm of public relations for schools. This suggests a dual effort: (a) working directly on attitude improvement; and (b) developing programs and efforts based on periodic needs sensing techniques. These programs should show the school patrons that the school cares--that it desires to serve community concerns in a positive way in return for a better "image."

Currently, many administrators are working to improve discipline and academic performance. These are noble goals, but they appear to be single-dimension thrusts. Strategies for improving confidence must address the fact that attitudes (affective elements) are prominent in both gain and loss of confidence. When attempting to win confidence, we tend to forget that we are working to gain "affect," and we tend to use cognitive methods, failing to see that the affective climate of the school and district speaks far louder than anything we can <u>do</u> to win confidence.

References

Achilles, C. M., & Lintz, M. N. (1984, April). Information and communication: Tools for increasing confidence in the schools. Paper presented at AERA Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Achilles, C. M., Lintz, M. N., & Wayson, W. W. (1984, Spring). Building public confidence in public education: Some preliminary data. Tennessee Education, 14(1), 14-19.

Bobbitt, R., et al. (1968). Organizational behavior: Understanding and prediction (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Brofenbrenner, U. (1972, October). Childhood: The roots of alienation. National Elementary Principal, 52(2), 22-29.

Cunningham, L. L., & Carol, L. N. (1984, April). Views of public confidence in education: Outside of school systems. Paper presented at AERA Convention, New Orleans, LA.

Daugherty, T. B. (1969, September). Natural public relations: Our community. The Agricultural Education Magazine 42(3), 79.

Elam, S. M. (1983, September). The Gallup education surveys: Impressions of a poll watcher. Phi Delta Kappan, 65(1), 26-30.

Everhart, R. B. (1977, Summer). From universalism to usurpation: An essay on the antecedents to compulsory school attendance legislation. Review of Educational Research, 47, 499-527.

Gallup, G. H. (1983, September). The 15th annual Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. Phi Delta Kappan, 65(1), 33-47.

Lasswell, H. D. (1971). A pre-view of policy sciences. New York: American Elsevier Publishing Company, Inc.

Merton, R. (1957). Social theory and social structure. New York: The Free Press Publishers.